

Political economy of sustainable development



QAZI KHOLIQUZZAMAN AHMAD

BANGLADESH Economic Association enjoyed a rare opportunity of hosting Nobel laureate economist Professor Kenneth J. Arrow for a public lecture on 18 December 2002. We are greatly honoured. The subject matter of his lecture was "Some Paradoxes of Sustainability: Empirical and Theoretical." The 81 year old Nobel laureate, who won the prize in 1972 jointly with Professor J. R. Hicks for their pioneering contribution to general equilibrium analysis and welfare economics, spoke for more than one hour with great erudition. Over 800 people present on the occasion listened to his brilliantly insightful presentation in pin-drop silence. He came to Bangladesh on 15 December for a week to attend research review meetings of South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE) and has been staying at Rajendrapur. Professor Wahidul Haque, a former student of Professor Arrow's, has very perceptibly said in an article published in the Daily Star on 18 December: "The impossible is possible ... The theorist of all theorists is at the root of all grassroots." This speaks volumes and nothing more needs to be said about this great economist, one of the sharpest and most original economists ever.

By way of chairman's remarks, I referred to the global political economy paradox of the increasing global inequality and divisiveness while sustainability calls for equity and cohesiveness, an issue Professor Arrow chose not to talk about in his lecture. This piece, developed around those remarks, is written in honour of Professor Arrow.

The persisting widespread and often deep-seated poverty, exclusion, and disempowerment around the developing world are due, on the one hand, to reasons which are internal to particular countries -- but the set also includes those that are externally imposed; and, on the

other, to the workings of the highly iniquitous global system of which each particular country is a part. The internal problems are surely important -- these include poor governance, pervasive corruption, confrontational politics, violence, and law and order problems. The neo-liberal economic policies being now pursued around the developing world, for example, have been externally imposed under a threat that assistance would not otherwise be provided.

The external reasons include the impact of the global capitalist expansion as the key aspect of the ongoing globalization that is focused on exploiting natural resources, cheap labour, and markets and the impact of the way the international institutions -- including the United Nations, but in particular the Bretton Woods institutions and

the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) adopted in that Summit all talked of ways forward along a sustainable development pathway, both conceptually as well as for moving on to practice through common but differentiated responsibilities. But, very little happened as a follow-up in terms of action.

The Kyoto Protocol adopted in 1997 was another major positive step forward. But it is not yet ratified adequately for it to become operative. Moreover, the USA has opted out of it; even its watered-down version hammered out in Marrakech is not acceptable to the USA.

Then came the most recent big event, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in August-September 2002. The Summit produced what has been described by many as a kind of anti-climax. The build-up to it generated great expectations. But it could not break any major ground for a forward thrust. However, the hopes are kept alive -- for further discussions and negotiations. But, practice remains neo-liberalism-driven. Hence, the disempowerment process will

continue -- and frustrations will multiply.

In addition to the landmark events I have just outlined many other conferences and workshops concerning sustainable development have been convened at international, regional, and national levels during the past decade or so. Indeed, the Rio Earth summit, the Johannesburg WSSD, the Conferences of the Parties, the Rio+5 UN General Assembly, and the various regional, sub-regional and national preparatory meetings towards the WSSD have all highlighted the key message that sustainable development can be achieved only if there is global cooperation in which the pre-eminent responsibility lies with the developed countries. But, as I have explained earlier, while the developed countries have been quite generous in terms of making prom-

No one will go back empty handed As they come On the shores of the sea of India's great humanity."

In the above quotation, the west of course is the advanced world, and India represents the underdeveloped world. But humanity includes within its fold the totality of all the inhabitants of this world and it transcends all narrow, human-made national boundaries. Tagore passionately believed that the salvation of this universal humanity lies in the working together of the advanced countries and the poor world for upholding human dignity and the spirit of humanity around the world. That progress, to be worthwhile, has to be a spontaneous joint venture by all. He put his trust in the west as the leading partner in that joint effort.

But during a time span of 30

This being so, how might one visualize the future?

Under the business-as-usual scenario in terms of the currently ruling neo-liberal paradigm, the future of the global order cannot but be a mirror image of the present, only worse. That would be a 21st century *déjà vu*, a *la* Tagore. The increasing inequality and contradictions between developed countries on the one hand and developing ones on the other cannot be morally and ethically justified. Clearly, this paradigm cannot be sustained over the long run unchallenged and without having to face serious backlash and upheavals. At the country level also, most developing countries including Bangladesh, which are implementing the free market reforms as prescribed, face moral/ethical quagmires and practical unsustainability.

In the light of such outcomes of neo-liberalism, Francis Fukuyama's thesis of 'The End of History', stating that liberal democracy has finally triumphed over all other forms of governance, is to be rejected. Given that neo-liberalism continues to rule, Samuel Huntington's thesis of possible clashes among civilizations seems credible. Raging tensions and contradictions between the winners and the losers may lead to clashes between the two groups at the global level as well as within nations. Since, at the global level, the western countries are the winners and the others, generally, the losers, clashes between the western civilization on the one hand and other civilizations, singly or some of them at once, on the other can be foreseen as a scenario.

In order to avoid travelling down that road, the nations of the world, developed and developing, must all find ways and means of moving together as an integrated global society in an orderly fashion. For constructing such a pathway, there is no shortcut to finding an appropriate solution to the problem of the glaring and increasing inequality among nations and among population groups within nations. That is, a paradigm shift to sustainable development, briefly conceptualized earlier, is called for. The message is loud and clear in both global and national contexts: to heed this call and mend ways or face the inevitable consequences.

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regional banks -- are managed. Although poverty alleviation is at the top of the currently stated agendas of these institutions, all of them remain geared to promoting neo-liberal economics that focuses on privatization, deregulation, and globalization. The winners in this paradigm are the rich and powerful countries globally, and the rich and powerful people within countries, and the losers are the developing countries in general and poor people within the developing countries in particular. In fact, disparity has been increasing even in the developed countries.

While all this is going on in practice, there is the call for sustainable development characterized by economic vibrancy, social equity, inclusiveness, and cohesiveness, and environmental protection. Incidentally, both the concepts of sustainable development and of globalization gained wide currency in development discourses during the 1990s. But globalization, which is driven by neo-liberalism as orchestrated by the so-called Washington Consensus, is firmly in place. On the other hand, sustainable development remains an ideal. In

years, they remained very short on delivery. Moreover, a hegemonic unipolar world order is becoming increasingly entrenched, particularly through military-force-backed political and diplomatic interventions.

The outlook has changed again and again from enthusiasm to frustration to hopelessness. In this context, let me turn to our great poet, Nobel Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore, who won the prize in 1913 for literature. He has written on most aspects of human existence and progress, including environmental issues which were not at all fashionable in those days. The breadth and depth of his writings are truly mind-boggling. He also has to his credit the national anthems of three countries -- a unique distinction. The countries are Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka.

Tagore, a great humanist in the finest tradition of European Renaissance and a firm believer all his life in the fundamental unity of mankind, wrote in 1910:

"Today the West has opened up its door From there all may bring their gifts; They will take, they will give, They will join, they will be joined;

environment living beings grapple with the harsh realities of life. I observed through camera lens that the young lions soon learnt that to chase is playful to test strength and ability to kill. They kill, when must -- only to satisfy hunger. In the animal kingdom no killing is for fun. Otherwise rampant killing would have turned the forest into a place without lives and the Jungle King would have reduced himself to a Forester."

Before he hopped to another cluster of viewers, he was asked how he would relate his experience to the human society? "I lived in the animal arena for the better part of my life watching the behaviour of herds and the packs from behind my camera. To tell you frankly I have rarely seen human habits. Occasionally I return to 'civilized

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Agony of being killed bit by bit

M SHAFIULLAH

THE First Kill and the Agony" was the caption of a photograph in an exhibition of African wild life in the Australian National Museum in Canberra. It was seemingly a plain and everyday occurrence in the jungle setting -- three lions were eating a deer who was still struggling for life. Apparently the photograph had no special effect but then why the piece found place among the exhibits of rare collections in the famous world class museum? While a group of diplomats were musing over, the photographer came to their rescue! A thoroughbred professional, he read the inner thought of the visitors. Asking for their engaging eyes to the subject, he gave a graphic description to the

missing links which the viewers overlooked.

The three young lions were making feast of the deer by eating him alive. According to him this could have been a 'normal' phenomenon if a python was devouring an animal but this was unbecoming of the lions' behaviour. The photo-journalist described the 'normal procedure' was followed by experienced hunter-killers in the deadly game. He had snapped a few ghastly sequence with tele-lens from camouflaged hideouts. He saw animals of same kind move in herds either for grazing or for water or for shelter. A lion or tiger would drive the herd to isolate a weaker one. The strayed soul is overpowered in the hot pursuit. He would bite the legs of the fleeing animal to immobilize the prey. In the next sequence the killer

would grab the neck of the kill to break it or suffocate the animal to death. The pack joins the killer if the animal is bigger for one to master it. Before devouring the flesh the killers suck blood while it is warm. Half way through the meal, carcass is abandoned for the lesser subjects of the animal kingdom or dragged to the den for dinner at leisure.

"In this particular piece," the master-photographer pointing to the hanging picture, observed, "the cubs did not follow the normal practice of hunting. The young lions surrounded the deer after a breathtaking chase, caught it in standing position and started eating without killing it first. It speaks of their first kill with no previous experience. Look, the pride of the young ones in their capability of first act while the agonising cry of the prey and its

innocent eyes are focussed on the conquerors of its life and limbs."

The narration was so absorbing and spell-binding that the audience felt they had travelled thousands of miles into Africa, watching the hunting ground only to return to safety when the description was over. The flash-point of camera provided the diplomats with an insight to look beyond the bare bones in the society where they live and work. "Like the first kill of the young lions, is it your first snap of this kind?" Inquisitive eyes turned to the photographer. "No, not really," He responded. To satisfy their curiosity the free-lancer added, "Like the young lions in this exhibit, I made mistakes in exposing the films in quest of my curiosity to put into frame how coming out of protective

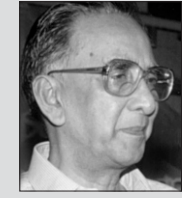
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society' to exhibit my 'expose' of the Natural Life -- less complicated but more fulfilling. This much I learnt that the eyes of the victims' haunt the 'victim' unto his grave for justice.

The de-humaniser may escape mundane justice but he lives in the living-hell of his conscience. In the last reckoning every life is accounted for. Life is a blessing of the Creator. He Who gave it, can only take it."

Former ambassador M Shafiqullah was Counsellor at Bangladesh High Commission in Canberra 1985-88. Now he is a Senior Research Fellow at Bangladesh Enterprise Institute.



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

Death in a custody

Death in a custody Wherever it may be, and In custody of whomsoever it may be Is a parody Of the man's right to life.

Hands tied in the back Eyes covered with a sack Is a parody Of the man's right to liberty, An arrested is entitled to Till he is accused and found guilty.

The interrogator's heart is made of stone That of the accused is the exact clone Of an ordinary human heart

A man gets a heart condition Soon after he is arrested. But for keep going He may not need a doctor. He may suffer the violence Of His Eminence the Inquisitor Or of His Highness the Interrogator. He badly, however, needs a lawyer Who may advise him to keep silence.

An interrogator is deaf. He cannot hear an accused cry On seething pains caused by him.

An interrogator is blind. He cannot see the accused Writing in pain caused by him.

An interrogator is dumb. He cannot speak out How his heart responds When the accused dies of heart failure. He is cocksure The accused had the heart-condition from before.

The right to benefit of doubt Is a parody When the interrogator claims and gets it And the accused is denied.

The accused has returned to Him. Surely we all return to Him.

The interrogator has returned to the camp. There may be another arrest And another death in the custody.

Death in a custody Wherever it may be, and In custody of whomsoever it may be Is a parody Of the man's right to life.

Surely we shall all return to Him. Does not the Giver, Cherisher and Sustainer of life Want us enjoy On earth the most wonderful right, The right to life?

Does not He badly need our praise? I believe, He does. Praise and raise your voice: Glory be to God.

Again, Praise and raise your voice: Glory be to God.

And again Praise and raise your voice: Glory be to God.

And pray For the departed Who died yesterday In custody.

Muhammad Habibur Rahman is former Chief Justice and head of caretaker government.

A question

NAHID KHAN

WE are going to Dhaka on the 26th December after being away for four years and we are getting more excited by the minute. I will see my parents, siblings, friends and relatives and talk endlessly with no need to worry about speaking correct English. It will be like a freedom. The city in which I grew up, where I know all the streets no matter how much they have changed, seems to me still my same old town. The air still brings the smell of my university days which were full of life. We spent hours and hours in the seminar room talking about every possible topic ranging from economics to music, childhood memories to old age uncertainty, sports to literature. Sometimes there was heated debates on Tagore's short stories versus Manik Banarjee's. At some point our friend Nuban would deliver a whole story by Banarjee without any mistakes. Meanwhile Kanuda probably served his horribly sweet tea. Dear old Kanuda sometimes favoured me by making an extra cup without sugar but I had to accept it without milk. The quality of the tea did not matter. The main thing was Kanuda being happy and letting us use the seminar room when it wasn't in use. The "adda" continued till we had no excuse for staying any longer as other real life matters took priority.

Seven years passed in no time at all. Our group always found it easy to make up an instant party at any excuse. Nuban found his lost library book, so a party; Shimul's sister got first class in exam, so a party; I had my long-awaited flat in the campus, so a party; even Sohail came in shoes instead of his regular thongs one day, so a party. Nuban was always a vibrant participant in all those events despite his commitment to study, as he was preparing for a first class degree.

My husband and Nuban's father worked in the same department, so often we had family gatherings. We went to

their house several times and were delighted to see the family atmosphere. I always thought I would be very blessed if one day I could raise my own family like Nuban's. I was amazed to see how attached that family was and how I felt so comfortable in that house during the many hours I stayed. I realized how Nuban had become so friendly and funny.

His friendship, for which I am greatly indebted, will be cherished by many others. Nuban always helped others if he could but the thought of hurting anyone never entered his mind. He was a general well-wisher of everyone he knew. He always saved seats for us in the front for lectures. At that time we all thought the only way to get good results was by sitting in the front. So when we couldn't run fast enough we knew that somehow Nuban would manage to save a full row of front seats for us. He never hesitated to help others in academic matters. Which topics should be emphasized for an exam, how to solve the math questions, would always be discussed sincerely by him. A very understanding person, he always looked at the positive side of life. Most of all he was very happy with what he had and never longed for extravagance. He wanted to be a teacher and to lead a simple life just like his father. In his mind, life-style was simple but thinking was as high as donating his eyes to "Shandhani" after death. All those dreams and hopes he was keeping inside had just begun to be realized. Nuban, an ideal son for any mum can dream of, after receiving first class in Honours and Masters joins the economics department in the University of Dhaka as a lecturer, a bright young economist gets married and starts his life with pride thinking all his hardship during student life has been paid off at last. I wish I could write here then they lived happily ever after.

As the date draws nearer it also reminds me of total disbelief when on that very day in 1995 I just arrived home from the airport and our friend Liza called to say, "Nahid, where have

you been? Nuban is gone." I still wish after seven years that it was a nightmare and wasn't real. I knew he was in hospital but did not realize that he would never recover from the injuries. So the shock of the phone call still feels fresh and hits me with the same strength, maybe harder, and reminds me of the question Liza prepared for the Almighty if she ever gets a chance to ask, "why Nuban?" One might think why not, as this happens everyday. But for us who knew Nuban in the Economics department with a linen bag carried on his shoulder, with big smiles all the time, who would always lighten the air for everyone he knows, the best student in the class who loved economics, is unbearable to accept that the man who couldn't even talk in a loud voice at anyone for the greatest mistake can be brutally bashed to such a disgraced death.

I specially feel like writing this piece because the date is coming nearer and I will be in the same city where Nuban is only in memories. Otherwise he would be the first among friends who would come to my parents' residence to say hello with a big smile and would say "Gosh! You've been eating a lot!" I don't even have a picture of him because he was the one who always took the pictures in every friendly gathering on so many occasions. Why didn't I ever ask him to let me take a snap? Probably he wouldn't let me, thinking it would be difficult for me to handle his manual camera. Photography was his passion. He took good care of his camera and did not allow anyone tampering with it. That damn camera had to go wrong so he had to take it for repair as he was about to go away for his second anniversary, which happened to be on the 26th December, and never returned home except as a body. Does blaming a faulty camera reduce the frustration in one's heart?

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